No. 3

# *About* MELANESIA

## The Daily Task of a Missionary in Melanesia

# THE DAILY TASK OF A MISSIONARY IN MELANESIA

THE question has often been asked, what is the daily routine of a missionary? How does he spend his time from day to day? The district missionary is not merely a preacher of the Gospel by any means. His teaching must be by example rather than by precept. He has to be a "jack of all trades," missionary, builder, doctor, dentist, sailor, lawyer, judge. He is a nomad, constantly on the move, either by whaleboat or on foot, climbing with difficulty into the bush villages high up in the hills, ministering to his scattered flocks. He has come to be everything to these people. Conditions are extremely primitive in many of the Melanesian islands; it is difficult to believe that only some 2,000 miles away from New Zealand conditions can be so primitive. Civilisation has advanced slowly, and the missionary has been the means of a peaceful development, and has paved the way for good government, a fact which is testified to by many of the empire's administrators.

MANY people, comfortably situated in New Zealand, know little of what is done from day to day by this splendid band of workers who are building up a Christian civilisation, and should be deeply impressed with the splendid work which is being done for the island natives. We "outsiders" may commiserate with the missionary for being cut off from all contact with his fellow white people. Many of us wonder how the missionary can carry on, year after year, often ruining his health through living for many years in an atmosphere saturated with malarial fever. Take the case of a missionary man or woman, stationed on one of these Melanesian Islands for some years; a family of about 200 to 300 native men, women and children, cannot be left or discarded too easily, Melanesians are people of great affections; they grow to have a child-like trust in the missionary, and nothing but a complete breakdown in health would persuade the missionary to leave his post. In a village built up and developed under great difficulties, the natives, having shared with the white man all their ups and down and vicissitudes of fortune, naturally

become a very real part of the white man's life. He is the sharer of their joys, the consoler of their sorrows, the giver of a new life to his flock.

THESE people are scattered over a vast area—a New Zealand parish is child's play compared with the work of a district missionary in the British Solomon Islands. Picture to yourself an island some hundred miles long and approximately thirty miles wide at its widest part, with a sinister reputation for head-hunting and cannibalism, and noted for the practice of many dreadful heathen customs—an island with a population that the Government estimates to be some 60,000. These people will travel day and night through tortuous native tracks from the bush villages located anything up to 4,000 feet above sea level to visit the white man on every pretext, and the missionary needs no excuse to visit them, for he is ever welcome.

HERE, for instance, is a district missionary with about 85 miles of coast line under his supervision, and some ten bush villages to reach, some of which mean practically a whole day's journey. There are thirty Church villages, with one native priest, and fifty native teachers, assisting in taking daily services, day school, special classes for baptism and confirmation, praying with the sick folk and ministering to the people generally.

THE missionary, in addition to having at least a working knowledge of Mota, the "lingua franca" of the central schools of the Mission, must acquire the language or languages of his own particular district. The coastal and bush people have been, from time immemorial, sworn enemies, and their languages are so widely divergent that neither can understand the language of the other. A Government publication states authoritatively that there are known to be at least forty

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languages in the Protectorate, and on the Island of Malaita there are books already printed in four or five of these languages or dialects. Amongst the Arawa tribe on the South Coast of New Britain, on the coast line of about 90 miles, it is believed that there are some fifteen dialects, amounting in some instances to different languages. Six dialects are found in one tribe alone.

WHEN at his headquarters, the district missionary will start his day by rising at 5.30 a.m. (or even earlier) to take full advantage of the morning cool; a celebration of Holy Communion will take place soon after 6 a.m., followed by examinations of the various classes in day school often held in the native church; then baptisms, or examination for baptismal and confirmation candidates, will follow before or after breakfast, as is most convenient. There may be a wedding; and sick visiting has to be fitted in sometimes ere the missionary packs up to go by whaleboat to the next village, where a stay of three or four days would be the ideal, but is often difficult to arrange, as boat's crew boys (for the whaleboat) are not easily obtainable; they are often married men with growing families, and are needed to assist with the food gardens of their village, growing crops, tending their children, etc. He has, as a rule, to search nearby villages to secure the necessary six men for a week's trip with the boat. Rowing in the boat day after day for some hours under a searching tropical sun, perhaps in heavy or wet weather, is not exactly fun, but really hard work, even to the native. A considerable part of the missionary's time is taken up in travelling round his huge "parish," by means of a whaleboat—a tedious and most unsatisfactory mode of progress. In all weathers, sometimes by night, he is exposed to the elements, the sea frequently being the opposite to "pacific." Even travelling by launch is not always the joyous thing that it is usually thought to be; for instance, when one of our missionaries was recently returning to his headquarters from a place which he had been visiting 70 miles away, it was necessary to make no less than five attempts before the boat could be got away, owing to the rough weather. The fifth attempt was successful at 2 a.m., and it occupied five days to return to the mission station. Each day, shelter had to be taken behind one of the numerous tiny islands, and then as opportunity arose, and the moon rose each night, a race had to be made to the next possible anchorage. This little experience is an instance of open sea work in what is considered to be the worst coast in the whole of the Territory, both from the point of view of reefs and rough seas.

AFTER a long and strenuous journey by boat, a rest is highly desirable on getting ashore; but not so in the native eye! Here is the golden opportunity which he has been anticipating for weeks! He will immediately ask for medicine and medical attention, even before one lands on the beach! He will air his grievances, beg for fishing lines and hooks, bring native food to barter for the much prized tobacco, perhaps he will ask for advice about special examinations of baptismal and confirmation candidates; he will want to arrange for weddings or baptisms, or judgment of particular cases of discipline. Perhaps it is time for Evensong, with preparation for to-morrow's Holy Communion service. In the evening, the best time of the whole long day, scriptural pictures and illustrated papers are shown in the cool outside, under the glorious tropical stars and palms, some of the natives staying very late to discuss private and personal problems and difficulties. Here is an instance which occurred to one missionary recently: Immediately on landing on one of his district visits, he was handed two grubby looking envelopes. As he was busy for some time with immediate needs, and supervising the landing of stores and the boat, the letters were put on one side; twice he had been asked if he had read them, and when he finally did so, he was amazed to find that the bearer had travelled some ten hours' journey across the island, to seek sanctuary with the white man, for he had killed his jealous wife with an axe in a fit of passion, and had come to the missionary because he thought that the latter, as a priest and man of

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God, could save him from the penalty of the law. The deed had been broadcast, witnesses were to hand, and native policemen were in evidence, so that the law took its course and justice met with a sentence of seven years' imprisonment. This is quoted as an example of the unexpected that so often happens in the daily life of a district missionary.

SURELY he is a jack of all trades. The missionary, often without previous experience, finds that he has to sail his boat and be responsible for its upkeep, painting and repairs, etc. He has to lay down a concrete floor, build a timber roof for his semi-native home—and this without the aid of even a tape measure! He has to act as money changer—the currency is fish (porpoise) teeth. The native teachers desire their small pay in kind, and so the missionary must act as buyer in groceries—haberdashery—hardware—calico —soap — tobacco —lanterns—boilers—kerosene—bags of flour—tins of meat—biscuits—axes and tools generally. He has to seek and prepare, ready for despatch, suitable village boys and girls for the mission central schools where they are to be trained as teachers. He has to steer an even line between what is allowed of former heathen customs, and those which in a Christian village must be forbidden.

MEDICAL work of a more or less elementary or amateur kind takes up much time, and is most effective as a practical way of preaching the Gospel. Heathen people are often attracted to Christian villages by the need of medical attention, staying on as hearers after being given treatment. Extremely few missionaries are within reach of a qualified medical officer whom they can consult, and so they have to tackle all and sundry cases by themselves. At one mission head station on the Island of Malaita, the missionary has had as many as sixty medical and surgical cases in one day, chiefly bad ulcers on the legs, inflamed eyes, malarial cases, coughs and colds; then there is the preparation of lint and cutting up of bandages; sick visiting in native homes in adjacent villages; extraction of teeth also is frequently called for, and is done without injection, the patient hardly ever complaining of pain; he goes away quite happy, provided he is given the offending molar for exhibition to admiring friends and relations. There are endless instances of the need of resourcefulness on the part of the missionary. A native arrived from a distant island, seeking an injection because his legs were very weak, and he had known of others who had received this mysterious injection, which had proved successful; but what he did not know, was that he himself was in an advanced stage of consumption, and that the injection which had proved successful with some of his fellows would probably have proved fatal if given to him.

OCCASIONALLY the missionary is called up during the night to sick cases. Recently at 1 a.m. a baby had been born down on the open beach; all had not gone well, and the mother and child could not be got back into the native hut. What about it? Well—suffice to say that "Peter" and his mother still live and flourish to-day! In another case, a woman died shortly after childbirth; the baby would have died also had it not been for the help given by the missionary's wife, and her constant care for some months. Another case shows how a native walked into the white man's house at 6 a.m. with a note from a district teacher, seeking first aid for wounds received in a village brawl. Perhaps the missionary has had no more than six months training in a missionary medical college. Remember too, that in the whole of the Solomon Islands, there will not be more than three or four qualified medical officers; two of them belonging to a splendid mission of another denomination, working in a more or less isolated group of islands; the Government medical officer, stationed at the Government headquarters; and one other qualified medical officer, attached to our own mission and necessarily restricted in his area of work owing to the large numbers of natives who will journey for days in order to reach the recently established permanent hospital of the Melanesian Mission.

AGAIN, translation work plays a most important part in the missionary's multifarious duties, and is ever on hand to fill up any spare moments. In one district there was no prayer book, to be classed as such, in the bush language, until the white man carried out the necessary translation, saw it through the mission Press, and finally placed it in the hands of those who sought it. Soon it is hoped to print the Gospels and Acts under one cover. In one part of this huge mission field, translation work is of even greater importance (and more difficult to carry out) because of the absence of a "lingua franca." It is more important because some written medium is essential for teaching purposes both in school and in Church, and it is more difficult because the only means of communication is pigeon English; and this is very inadequate for the purpose either of teaching or of obtaining information about the native languages. And there are to be found also—as in English—many words denoting the same thing; whilst one native will use one word, another will use quite a different one. This adds considerably to the difficulties of the translator.

IT will come as a surprise to many people to hear that one of our women missionaries has established a Mothers' Union. It seems hard to realise that such a thing can be possible in such primitive conditions, or that the natives can be made to

understand what the Mothers' Union stands for; but in a more or less elementary way a start has been made with this wonderful organisation, and the missionary has reported that the Mothers' Union is a very pleasant venture, and one from which most helpful results may be expected. The condition of the native woman in Melanesia in the past has been deplorable; her charm lay in her muscle—her ability to use an axe well, and carry enormous loads of food, water and firewood on her back. She might be knock-kneed, or pigeon-toed, cross-eyed or snub-nosed, but that was no deterrent to a possible suitor, provided she was a good worker.

MARRIAGES used seldom to be happy affairs in Melanesia; but great changes are taking place. The spirit of loving motherhood is being shown in the clean, jolly little babies one sees in Church, and the healthy children about the villages. It used to be the custom to feed native children with a hard root vegetable, from birth. "Look, he cries for food, roast him a taro!" The food was chewed up by any person handy, and then placed in the baby's mouth; the more it cried, the more it was given. Needless to say, infantile mortality was very high.

THERE is a case of a missionary in Melanesia who commenced his self-imposed task just over 30 years ago; he is no longer a young man, and in ordinary and more comfortable circumstances might reasonably have looked forward to some few years of less strenuous endeavour. This gallant soul, having realised that his particular task called for the energies of a younger man, voluntarily stood down, after having (in a sense) completed his life's work, and elected to spend his remaining years among the heathen on the artificial islands. The helplessness of the natives draws the missionary back to his task, and his love towards them forces him to return and spend himself in his Master's service.